

Equal Politics in Difficult Times: Can Welfare States Still Promote Equality?

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The future of the welfare state and a discussion of its contribution to dealing with income inequality in capitalist democracies are the subject of this article. Clearly, claims that the welfare state is about to wither away and disappear have proven wrong. Welfare states are more than likely to remain a major institution in capitalist democracies in the future. However, it is unclear whether they will be able to contribute significantly to the egalitarian project that seeks to limit social gaps and the degree of income inequality in these societies. Indeed, studies indicate that welfare states are finding it increasingly difficult to deal successfully with growing social gaps and to ensure low degrees of income inequality over time. The challenges facing the welfare states are demanding. They are a consequence of dramatic changes in the labor market in post-industrial societies, and of demographic changes, particularly in the social and economic life course of young adults, the rise of single-earner households and the growing importance of educational marital homogeneity – the tendency of "like to marry like". Dealing with these developments and maintaining an acceptable level of inequality are tasks that will require policy-makers committed to egalitarianism to take difficult and perhaps unpopular decisions in the future.

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